



During a recent documentary film shoot with a team from Spiegel TV in Germany we investigated aspects of tiger farming in Thailand and Laos before I then traveled on to China and Myanmar. There I looked into not just aspects of tiger bone consumption and the trade in tiger derivatives but also live animals. I presented some of the findings to members of the diplomatic community in Vientiane, Laos PDR who had expressed interest our findings, especially in the context of the US State Department award concerning Vixay Keosavang and his continued involvement in the wildlife and lion/tiger bone trade which we documented during an earlier visit.



Laotian military helicopters similar to the one pictured are illegally transporting tigers.

The information from the key farm owner that they were now shipping live tigers on Laotian PDR army helicopters to various locations was met with skepticism. As such I traveled and checked out one of the locations mentioned - the new casino set up in the special economic zone on the Lao PDR side of the golden triangle. The animal keeper showed me the eight remaining tigers from the shipment mentioned by the tiger farm owners in the south. He informed me that except for one female (kept in a small breeding cage with a male) they had received only males. As a result they have now ordered 8 more females which should arrive on March 10th 2014 in the same way the first group arrived – i.e. presumably by Laotian army helicopter!?



Bodies of evidence: Tiger claws, tiger penis and other endangered species body parts are openly available in the street markets.

It would be relatively easy to check out this information which in turn would help with establishing credibility concerning some of the other key points concerning tiger trafficking which I will outline below. All this is a complete and flagrant breach of the CITES "Tiger and other Asian Big Cat" provisions and presumably also national laws owing to the various promises made by the Tiger Range Countries under initiatives such as the Global Tiger Recovery Program.

CITES Decision 14.69 from the 14th Conference of the Parties to CITES in 2007 states that:

"Parties with intensive operations breeding tigers on a commercial scale shall implement measures to restrict the captive population to a level supportive only to conserving wild tigers; tigers should not be bred for trade in their parts and derivatives."

All tigers and other Asian big cat species are included in CITES Appendix I which bans their international trade for commercial purposes. In addition, the CITES Secretariat has gone on record stating that it considers 'trade' for the purposes of Decision 14.69 as including domestic trade. This is not least because domestic trade has been shown to undermine the international ban, stimulate poaching and significantly threaten the continued existence of tigers in the wild.



A pair of clearly very terrified and aggressive tiger cubs at Kunming Wild Animal Park.

I asked my local translator to ask some questions and he got confirmation that a shipment of tigers arrived at an army base about 6 months ago. I believe I have also seen some of these tigers at the Kunming Wild Animal Park where I filmed some very scared new arrivals refusing to leave their night housing. This was very different to the behavior of a large number of tigers in a wide range of other enclosures. Interestingly one of the former tiger keepers / trainers of this facility is now in charge of the new set up at the Kings Roman Casino in Lao PDR.

As on many other fronts (e.g. rhino horn, lion bones, primates, python skins etc.) Lao PDR seems to be one of the region's worst offenders when it comes to compliance with the CITES convention. Based on the information collected on this trip, my conclusion is that Lao PDR is in the process of becoming even more established as a place where anything goes, with wide open borders as far as trafficking wildlife into next door China and Vietnam.



Rhino horn, ivory and other derivatives of animals are common place.



Tiger Tourism facilities are opening thick and fast throughout South East Asia and China



The tiger farming, which is clearly meant to be highly restricted - not least because the introduction of captive bred tigers into the wild has never been successfully achieved - looks like it is now really taking off. It is already completely out of the control of any national authorities or CITES officials in terms of animals being registered etc.

Here some of the key findings:

1. There are clear links between the Tiger Kingdom operations in Thailand (Phuket and Chiang Mai), their Ubon Ratchathani holding facility, and the large farm set up on the other side of the Mekong in Lao PDR.
2. Ownership of these facilities appear to be closely interlinked and involves high powered individuals on the Thai side with the manager of the Ubon Ratchathani facility being an adviser to the Thakhek farm in Laos which he visits regularly.



Tiger cubs are removed from their mothers so they can quickly become pregnant again.

3. The two Tiger Kingdoms in Thailand are breeding jointly about 100 tigers a year for their tourist petting operations. Neither were amongst the four establishments that Thailand advised CITES in late 2009 it had granted legal breeding permits to. The set up in Chiang Mai has been breeding about 40 offspring a year (all pulled from the mother at birth in the kind of intensive breeding operations that CITES Decision 14.69 was passed to put an end to). This has been the case for about 5 years by now.
4. There have been several seizures of tigers on the Thai side of the Mekong on route to Lao PDR

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16 tiger cubs rescued from back of pickup in Thailand (VIDEO)

Thai police find 16 tiger cubs hidden in back of pickup near border with Laos.

Thai police arrested a man driving a truck with 16 tiger cubs packed into plastic crates hidden in the back.

The arrest happened as the man tried to avoid a highway check-stop near Thailand's border with Laos, The Associated Press reported.

He told police someone paid him \$500 to transport the animals.

The man faces four years in jail or a \$1,300 fine, the AP said.

A wildlife center is now taking care of the cubs.

More from GlobalPost: [Tigers in Nepal hunting at night to avoid humans](#)

The 52-year-old suspect's trip began in



A baby tiger named Daseepis grows at the Frankfurt Zoo on October 6, 2010. (BORIS ROESSLER/AFP/Getty Images)

Advertisement

(<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/thailand/121027/16-tiger-cubs-rescued-back-pickup-thailand-video>).

5. Visiting the zoo in Ubon Ratchathani we found about 50 adult tigers in a facility not geared to tourists or local visitors. The entry fee is very low. This is the very opposite of what is happening in Chiang Mai and Phuket and what will be the case at another such facility now planned for outside Bangkok. Tourist petting set ups earn tens of thousands of dollars a day in Phuket and Chiang Mai. Ubon Ratchathani appears to be a holding and laundering facility close to the Mekong and Lao PDR's border.



The tiger holding facilities at Ubon Ratchathani.

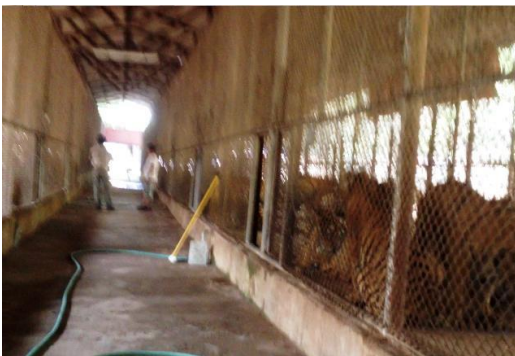
6. There appears to be limited breeding at the Ubon Ratchathani facility and we filmed only one very small (again, pulled from its mother at birth) baby in an incubator.

7. Our local investigator from Lao PDR asked on hidden camera about purchasing tigers for a new facility at Boten (another casino town in a special zone at the Lao PDR / China border). He was given prices for the adults and the cubs and told where to take them across the Mekong River.



A severely dehydrated and starved tiger in Guilin tiger farm.

He received confirmation that they had a close link with the Thakhek Tiger farm and clearly surplus tigers were regularly shipped from Thailand into Lao PDR.



8. While driving from Pakse in Lao PDR to Thakhek our interpreter talked to various boat operators and met two who offered to traffic tigers across the Mekong River. They said they had done so before and confirmed that it would not be a problem. One then regularly called during the

Tigers at Thakhek tiger farm (footage taken from hidden camera).

following days to determine when such a transfer would need to be arranged.

9. We then visited the Thakhek tiger farm for a second time (the first time last October), this time accompanied by a Chinese national to play the potential buyer. One of the owners was present, a Vietnamese of Chinese origin, and he was very suspicious about the motives for the visit and needed a lot of convincing (recorded on hidden camera).

10. He made the point that a Vietnamese media team had managed to get into the facility some three years earlier which had resulted in lots of media attention including internet exposure which the Laotian authorities had not liked. As a result he had to visit Vientiane and part with a US\$ 1 million bribe to be able to continue.



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<http://bigcatrescue.org/tigers-farmed-and-sold-for-their-bones-in-vietnam/>

A screenshot of a news article from VietNamNet. The article title is "Breaking into Southeast Asia's largest 'tiger den'". The byline reads "Cập nhật lúc 09:13, Thứ Hai, 12/04/2010 (GMT+7)". The sub-headline is "VietNamNet reporters investigate wildlife trafficking from Laos into Vietnam". The main headline is "The war against Vietnam's wildlife". The article text describes the location of the Muang Thong tiger farm on Highway 13, about 30 kilometers from Thakhek town, and mentions that VietNamNet reporters spent several months tracking down information and making contacts before infiltrating the largest tiger farm in Southeast Asia. It also notes that the reporters, posing as people who had come to Laos to buy tigers for tiger bone glue, crossed into Laos at the Cau Treo border gate (Ha Tinh) and then

11. When, prior to the October trip, we tried to recruit the same Vietnamese journalists who got into this tiger farm in 2010 (to assist with setting up another visit) we got the following response by e-mail: "4. We think it will take 1 month that's also a problem for our office. It will be a dangerous trip (even life-threatening), is there any security plan?"

12. The Thakhek tiger farm currently has about 400 tigers and a wide range of other wildlife including bears, clouded leopards and pangolins that seem to be in a holding set up. The tiger section is presently being expanded to hold 800 tigers!?

13. All the food (chicken bone and feet) is being shipped to the Thakhek tiger farm from Thailand and the rations are about 2 kgs per tiger per day.

14. On a previous visit, a few years earlier, a disease outbreak (most likely bird flu) had been given as a reason to our local investigator for not allowing outsiders inside the facility and even staff having had to be quarantined. When he raised this issue with the management this time around they informed him this had been overcome and each tiger now received an antibiotic injection once

a week. We were told that they could not provide the details of what was injected and to talk to the manager from Ubon Ratchathani (the name was provided) who was a regular visitor and dealt with these issues



Frozen tiger for sale.

15. On the earlier visit we had been informed about the option of buying a live tiger on the hoof (maybe better paw) which would cost 8000 baht per kg (up from 6500 Baht in October 2013). We were informed there would be a discount of some 7- 8 kgs for intestines but the average 200kg tiger would cost some U\$ 50,000. The chosen tiger would then be executed using electric shocks (!). The customer would determine if he wanted to sell any part back to the farm (claws, skin teeth etc.) and how he wanted to take the rest with the bones being the key component for most clients. Chinese buyers always seem to prefer males since they associate a high value with the penis. Vietnamese buyers would also buy females.

16. For Vietnamese buyers there was a facility and an expert in Thakhek who could cook down the tiger bones into tiger glue/cake.

<http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2013/11/29/of-tiger-and-lion-bones-and-the-legalizing-of-the-rhino-horn-trade/>

17. If a customer was worried about transporting the parts in his car, the local bus company could take consignments as far as Vientiane or Boten without problems.

18. This visit however was not about being a standard customer wanting to buy one tiger but a consignment of live tigers to set up a facility at Boten. The price quoted was again U\$ 50,000 per cat, but we were told it was now too difficult to ship a consignment of live adult tigers by road. This is why they would require the shipment to be delivered by helicopter which in turn would cost an additional U\$ 30,000. It would be an army helicopter which could take up to 12 sedated tigers in



shipping cages. Each cage would cost U\$ 800 and we took pictures of some of them at the Kings Roman set up. There would also be another U\$ 10,000 payable for paperwork and bribes along the way.

Large cat transport cages.

19. When the potential buyers pointed out that they could have bought tigers cheaper (including the newly born cub at US\$ 1,000) on the Thai side they were told they should try. It was made clear to them that many tiger shipments across the river had been confiscated on both sides because their discussion partners had control of all trade via the boat people doing these transfers along this stretch of the Mekong. Any attempt to get tigers from anywhere else would be reported to them. Essentially they were declaring that they had a monopoly set up and that there was no point for any third party to test them on it.

20. They did not allow any open filming or photography and as on the previous visits the visual records and audio files we have are from a hidden camera.

21. During an October 2013 exchange with Mr. Vixay Keosavang he mentioned that he knew the owners of the Thakhek farm very well and that he had set up his own tiger breeding operation and already had 30 tigers. When we checked his former facility where he had been holding macaques for export we found it had closed down and ownership reverted back to the army. It had not been converted to tiger breeding as we had assumed so there is the possibility that this additional farm is located somewhere else.

There is little doubt that there is a clear link between the owners and operators of the Tiger Kingdom set up in Thailand and the tiger farm in Thakhek. There is no doubt that there is a supply chain from this farm to what will be a large scale new breeding set up at the Special Economic Zone and the King Romans casino in Lao PDR. In the past large gambling wins at the casino meant a bear banquet had to be sponsored by the winner.



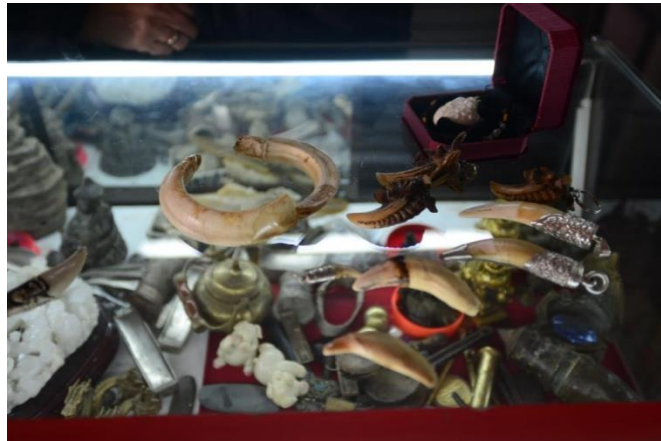
The link to the Yunnan province is somewhat more circumstantial and involves the trafficking of a large shipment of tigers across an international border. The tiger petting set up in Kunming looks very similar to the Thai operations and some of the information boards even include the words 'Tiger Kingdom'. A number of tigers are still kept in transport cages and the live chicken feeding (that was previously declared to have been banned) and renting out of fishing type poles (with pieces of meat at the end of the line for visitors to tease tigers with) are part and parcel of increasing the income and profitability.

The facts that there appear to be new and very shy arrivals at this facility (which also has a dubious track record concerning the white rhinos they acquired from South Africa) and one of their tiger keepers has moved from Kunming to the Special Region to be in charge of the new tiger operation are indicators that these facilities are all interlinked.

Tiger Kingdom marketing at Kunming Wild Animal Park, China.

They have no problem sourcing or breeding the tigers for these operations and the expertise needed is pretty much franchised out by the original owners in Thailand who might also be shareholders in some of these new set-ups. With tourist packages of, 15 minutes with the tigers costing some U\$ 20 per session per person (there are different rates for visits with small tigers, medium sized and fully grown tigers) and with hundreds of tourists channeled through these facilities on a daily basis, there is little doubt that these operations offer an attractive investment proposal and will expand.

As for the surplus tigers being shipped out the back door for further breeding purposes or for sale in form of other tiger products such as bone, teeth, claws etc. this is another key profit center. Besides the sale of tigers at the farm to parties visiting from China and Vietnam we have also documented tigers being sold out of freezers on the Vietnam side of the border.



Once a tiger is no longer earning money as a tourist attraction, its value can be added to by slaughtering it and selling the body parts.

The villages along the border closest to the Thakhek tiger farm have developed a cottage industry with tiger cake production facilities just across the border in Vietnam's Ha Tinh province. Those facilities are also boiling down the lion bones legally imported from South Africa into Lao PDR from where they are then trafficked across this international border into Vietnam where they are passed off and sold as tiger skeletons for the production of tiger bone cakes.



The author with a glass of tiger wine from the tanks in the background. The alcohol has been marinating with tiger bones and ginseng.

In China the demand characteristics are somewhat different. There it is mostly about the tiger bones and soaking them in alcohol, in vats and fish tanks filled with alcohol such as rice wine. The tiger bone wine produced in this way is then made available by the glass (about U\$ 15 per glass in restaurants at the Myanmar / China border) or in bottles, some of which are tiger shaped.

This is an organized wildlife crime scene evolving and evolving fast. As with many other species, the CITES rules and regulations associated with the trade are not taken seriously and in some ways the resolutions assist in creating a make believe scenario of there being some control which in reality does not exist or is used to increase the overall corruption and bribery potential when circumventing it.

I believe that once an operator has established how to market tiger Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) products and set up the corresponding trafficking network, moving on the Pangolins (as seems to have already happened), ivory and rhino horn etc. will all be the logical next steps. Some known Lao PDR wildlife traffickers are also said to be key players in the drug trade.

The overall conclusion is that things are getting worse very fast and whatever enforcement activities are being presented in the international media or to the CITES secretariat amount to mostly window dressing and lip service. While CITES has asked tiger range states to submit reports on their tiger farming industry the enforcement system appears to be geared to let most of the key players fly under the radar. These do not just include the syndicate documented on our trips but a range of smaller players and establishments, including operators in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.